

Scripture Readings

2 Chronicles 7:11-15

¹¹ When Solomon had finished the temple of the LORD and the royal palace, and had succeeded in carrying out all he had in mind to do in the temple of the LORD and in his own palace, ¹² the LORD appeared to him at night and said:

"I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a temple for sacrifices.

¹³ *"When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people, ¹⁴ if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land. ¹⁵ Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place.*

Romans 13:1-7

¹ Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. ² Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. ³ For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. ⁴ For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. ⁵ Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.

⁶ This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. ⁷ Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

Message : *Christians and Governments*

I must confess that for quite a while, especially during the last Presidential elections, I enjoyed listening to political pundits on the radio. Whenever I found myself out-and-about in the car I would listen to both “conservative” and “liberal” commentators trashing the “other” side. I found their conversations with callers to be entertaining and informative; informative in the sense that I often found myself developing my own opinions on topics such as immigration, taxes, and the like.

In the end, I discovered that I’m a mixture of “conservative” and “liberal”. I resonated with another radio host who stated just this week that “the only consistently pure “conservatives” or “liberals” are in fact the pundits.

In truth, I do not want to be known as a “conservative” or a “liberal”. The only label I want people to pin to be is “Christian”; an identity which must rise above politics, but will impact the positions we take as citizens in our Commonwealth and Nation.

Because of the contentious nature of politics these days; the divisions and deadlocks which threaten not only our Country, but nations around the world, I sensed the need to preach on this 4th of July weekend about Christians and governments.

- What does the Bible say about the role of earthly governments?

 - What responsibilities do governments have to their people?

- What does the Bible say about our responsibilities toward our government?

 - Specifically, as followers of Jesus Christ, how are we to interact with our government?

1. What does the Bible say about governments?

While our Lord Jesus reveals the Kingdom of God through His life-example and teachings, and while the Bible encourages us to see ourselves as “in the world but not of the world” (John 17:13-19), the Bible is very clear that even the earthly governments we have today exists under God’s power with a purpose defined by God.

Psalm 47:9b

*the kings of the earth belong to God;
he is greatly exalted.*

Also, as we just read in

Romans 13:1

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.

In short, though many have in the past, we cannot rationalize an “anti-government” stance because God is in favor of government. He supports government because in the very midst of a fallen and sinful planet, some form of earthly oversight is necessary to bring order to society.

Consider our own nation’s independence from the King of England. In the midst of our hard-fought freedom, we worked very hard to establish a fair and just government, because a world without government is a world is utter chaos. Think about Egypt right now. The old government was toppled, and a new government is needed. >>> Government is good.

Is it perfect?

No.

But, like the Church, it is an institution created by God with purpose, and the purpose of government is to restrain human foolishness, and foster our better qualities. More specifically, government is called to protect us by generating peaceful living, and to promote a common (godly) concerns for compassion, justice and mercy.

Are governments good at that? Some may be better than others, yet all fall short of perfection. But they have a purpose given to them by God, and if they come close to accomplishing that purpose then God's Kingdom is given fertile ground in which to advance.

One of the interesting observations we can make about a government's role and God's salvation is to consider the rule of Rome at the time of Jesus and the early church.

- Was Rome perfect in governance? No way.

 Their governance contributed to Jesus' death!!

- However, their governance led to a system of roads like none before, thus allowing the Gospel to travel to all corners of the known world.

- Also, Roman Pax (the peace & stability brought about in this Empire) gave Christians opportunity.

Sometimes government seems a pain in the derriere, especially when you get caught speeding, but imagine interacting with tens of thousands of strangers without rules which are enforced. Imagine living with daily fear and insecurity where the only rule is "might is right"!

During our children's message, I wanted our children and us older-types to understand God's love and hope for every government on earth,

yet on this 4th of July I do believe that we as Americans can feel especially fortunate that when our forefathers formed our Constitution they were people of faith who believed they were accountable to a Creator for the welfare and prosperity of their fellow citizens. One cannot read the Constitution without concluding that the writers believed that government was ordained by God.

And that is what the Bible tells us. That is truth. So then...

2. What does the Bible say about our responsibilities toward our government, specifically as God's Children following in the ways of Jesus Christ.

We can sum up the answer to this question very easily.

We are to cooperate with government whenever we can,
challenge government whenever necessary,
and pray for government all the time.

Hear what the Apostle Peter writes in

1 Peter 2:13-17

¹³ Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, ¹⁴ or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.

¹⁵ For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. ¹⁶ Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. ¹⁷ Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor.

If you ever find yourself ready to join with the pundits in trash-talking a current President, Governor, or Senator, would you first consider these biblical instructions? I ask you even as I ask myself!

Isn't it easy, these days, to join in the noise, rather than set a better example; a Christ-like example?

Now, if you find this suggestion hard because you feel that you are living under a particularly "wicked" ruler, please know that the Apostle Peter penned these words when Nero was governing Rome, and that it was likely that Nero's persecution of Christians included Peter's death!

God's Word comes to us out of a world where governing power was far from ideal.

So while we cooperate where possible, because God ordained government to restrain human foolishness and foster our better qualities, there will also be times when we must challenge the government. But we only do so when necessary, and we do so by respectfully speaking truth in love. And by "respectfully", I am saying that we must be willing to suffer any consequences as we act against governmental rules.

The Bible is very clear. We are not to suffer simply for the sake of suffering. Too many people suffer in this world because of their own sinfulness. But, when we suffer for that which is right; for righteousness sake, that is godly suffering which is applauded by God's Word. Indeed, that is taking up your cross and following Jesus!

Fortunately, we live in a country where our government can be challenged: first of all, our country allows us to publically disagree with the government. (Try that in China and see what happens!)

Fortunately, we live in a country where we can also protest. (Try that in Iran.) When normal channels of influence have been exhausted, Christians can continue to speak truth in what can only be called disruptive ways: boycotts, rallies, sit-ins and marches.

If such protests were not used in the 50's and 60's to proclaim the truth that America was a racist nation, full of inequalities and injustices toward African-Americans, where would we be today?

Are we a perfect nation? No. But because people were willing to protest back then, and accept the "punishment"/jail time demanded by human law in those days, we are a better nation today, at least in that matter.

And while we can challenge government through public disagreement and even protest, we can also disobey in our country. Again, respecting God's ordained government we must be willing to suffer the consequences of our disobedience. But disobedience is what we must do as Christians, if government ever asks us to do something God forbids, or forbids something God commands of us.

Last week we remembered Moses' mother. What was her name? (Jochebed). Pharaoh had ordered that all Hebrew baby boys be killed by throwing them into the Nile. Scripture records that Jochebed, along with the midwives named Shiphrah and Puah disobeyed their government's rules;

and I hope many others did as well.... For killing a baby was certainly something God forbids!

When God's children are willing to suffer for the sake of righteousness; to speak truth in love with respect for their governments, then there develops pressure for those governments to become better. This truth is at the very heart of the "non-violence" movement. As we have seen over the years, again most recently in Egypt, governmental injustices are revealed when met with non-violent protests.

We certainly live in a time when governments are being challenged, and more than a few are rapidly changing. And it is in that light that we hear from God's Word that which is the greatest thing we all can do to support our government. We can pray. Earlier we were reminded of this truth in a familiar OT passage, where God declared in a word to Solomon;

2 Chronicles 7:14

... if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

When the children of God humbly seek God through pray and obedience to His ways there will be healing in the land; period. Governmental change begins with our prayers and the godly changes we make in our lives.

It is so easy for us to point a finger at a politician's sin and declare that our government is the way it is because of them. But, didn't Jesus comment once about how we are so good at noticing the speck in someone else's eyes, but that we should be first concerned about the log in our own eye.

God will hear our prayers for the healing of our country when we turn from our wicked ways.

The NT echoes this call for our prayers. Paul wrote to Timothy:

1 Timothy 2:1-2

¹ I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—² for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.

As we hear this NT reminder to pray, we are reminded again of God's purposes for government; *that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.*

This morning I have only grazed the surface of a topic that I believe will only grow in importance. But I hope today's word has set-up at least a framework for considering Christians and government... Christians and governments all over the world. I hope too that it has suggested some ways you and I can live more biblically in relationship with our political leaders.

Before we move in our worship of God, around the Table of our Lord where we celebrate our unity and salvation in Jesus Christ, why don't we take a moment to pray for our country, and those who govern us.....